



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina

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THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

MY HEART AS SANCTUARY, MY LIFE AS PRAYER

My Heart as Sanctuary Genesis 3:1-10; Mark 1:9-15

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” Genesis 3:1-10

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Mark 1:9-15

The Gospel writer Mark is known for getting right to the point. In fact his Gospel opens with these words: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." There is no question about where he's going with his story, is there? Mark offers a brief connection with the prophecy of Isaiah, tells us that John the Baptist came out of the wilderness to call his people to repentance, and quickly moves to Jesus' baptism and time in the wilderness. There are no lengthy family trees as in Matthew's gospel. There are no supernatural stories as in Luke. There are no angels, no shepherds, no magi or Herod or escape to Egypt or childhood in Nazareth. For Mark, there is an urgency to get to the heart of the story which is the nearness of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

Although Jesus' baptism and his sojourn in the wilderness are trimmed to the barest details, they are not ignored. Baptism then and now symbolizes participation in the faith of the community, a cleansing of the soul, a death of the old self and a resurrection of the new person. The time in the wilderness was a time of preparation when Jesus fasted and prayed and listened. For us, it too has become a metaphor for our spiritual journey which looks, as Jesus did, to Jerusalem, the cross, and the garden of resurrection.

The season of Lent is intended to reflect Jesus' forty days in the wilderness and to become a time when we listen as we pray and fast and seek God in other ways. During this season, we are guided by the theme: "My Heart as Sanctuary, My Life as Prayer." On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we recognized that this season is a time to pay attention to ourselves. We heard that familiar spiritual reminding us that "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." Lent is a time to look at think about who we are, to look closely, intimately at ourselves in an honest way. With ashes smeared on our foreheads, we were reminded that "We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And, gathered at the Lord's Table, we rejoiced in the grace of God to forgive us when we truly repent.

Jesus' time in the wilderness gave him an opportunity to reflect on who he was as the Son of God and brother to the rest of us. It provided him time to think about the resources he had, what he would be asked to do, and how he would go about it. He had time to reflect on the scriptures which had taught him the story of God and his people. He had time to learn to pray which would prove to be his sustenance on many an occasion. Jesus' time in the wilderness was an opportunity for him to get to know himself and to prepare for his ministry to the world.

These days, very few of us spend any time in any place that is remotely considered wilderness. Our visits to the mountains or the coast or even occasional walks in the country are essentially done in familiar territory with all of the conveniences of home nearby. Real wilderness is beyond most of us.

So how can we even relate to Jesus' time in the wilderness and how can we replicate that experience for our own journey of faith? I think there is one place where we seldom venture far, one place that may still be wilderness for most of us.

Earlier in the service, we heard the familiar story of Adam and Eve in the garden and their tasting of the "forbidden" fruit and the consequences thereof. Think about their situation for a moment. The garden was certainly a "wild place" at this time in the story. It was new and unexplored, filled with creatures and plants of all kinds. To the man and the woman, however, it felt like a garden because God was there with them. God made that unknown territory seem less "wild" and more familiar and hospitable.

Then came the day when the woman and the man decided that it was okay for them to eat of the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden. As the story goes, the serpent called into question God's motive in denying them the enjoyment of this delicious fruit and planted the seed of distrust in their hearts. As their trust in God began to erode, the serpent also suggested that perhaps God was holding back on human potential and denying them the opportunity to become god-like themselves. His sales pitch was perfect and they took the bait. Immediately, we are told, they realized that they were naked, made aprons from leaves, and hid from God. Suddenly, what had been a beautiful and safe garden became a wild and frightening wilderness in which they did not even feel safe with God.

Perhaps in your channel surfing you have come across the Discovery Channel series titled "Naked and Afraid." It is a rather bizarre reality show which places two people in a wilderness somewhere on earth, takes away everything—including clothing—except for one survival tool they can choose. Their challenge is to survive for three weeks and make it to a distant point where they will be returned home.

I bring up this unusual reality series because its title sounds vaguely familiar. Listen again to these words from the third chapter of Genesis: "The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I

heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” “I was afraid because I was naked.” Naked and afraid. Some Hollywood producer has been reading his or her Bible!

The story of Adam and Eve in the garden and their subsequent distrust and disobedience of God remind us of an important truth about ourselves and our relationship with God. Frederick Buechner notes that nakedness is a metaphor for complete vulnerability. He suggests that it signals a letting down of our defenses, the putting aside of pretense, the revealing of our deepest secrets, and the willingness to be fully known.¹ Remember that before they questioned God’s trustworthiness, the man and the woman were naked and had no thought of being afraid of God. They literally had nothing to hide from God until their lack of trust in God resulted in their fear and unwillingness to be open to God.

During Lent, we venture back into the wilderness of our lives and seek to find that familiar garden where we feel safe and at home with God. That place, that sanctuary, is in our hearts, the core of who we are as humans and as children of God. Lent is about rediscovering that place where we can bare our souls (pun intended) and be completely vulnerable with God. It is where we can begin to rebuild our trust of God and God’s trust of us.

Getting to the heart of the matter, however, is not at all easy. Amy made the comment last week that “heart work is hard work.” It is. It requires going deep within ourselves, stripping away all pretense, all hiddenness, and being honest with ourselves and God.

Poet Jan Richardson speaks of what it is like to open up our hearts²:

To receive this blessing,
all you have to do
is let your heart break.
Let it crack open.
Let it fall apart
so that you can see
its secret chambers,
the hidden spaces

where you have hesitated
to go.

Your entire life
is here, inscribed whole
upon your heart’s walls:
every path taken
or left behind,

¹Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 83.

²Jan Richardson, “Rend Your Heart,” *Circle of Grace* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 93-94.

every face you turned toward
or turned away,
every word spoken in love
or in rage,
every line of your life
you would prefer to leave
in shadow,
every story that shimmers
with treasures known
and those you have yet
to find.

It could take you days
to wander these rooms.
Forty, at least.

And so let this be
a season for wandering,
for trusting the breaking,
for tracing the rupture
that will return you

to the One who waits,
who watches,
who works within
the rending
to make your heart
whole.

Lent is somewhat like a divine catheterization when we look at our heart, explore all of its chambers, check its function, and determine whether or not it is spiritually healthy. Lent is the opportunity to look honestly at our lives and determine whether we live in a wilderness afraid of God or in a garden where we are safe with God.

For this reason, we are asking everyone to consider writing your version of the poem, "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon, an Appalachian poet. Information about this opportunity has been included in The Link and is available on our website. The first step in opening our hearts is examining our lives. Where are you from? What shaped you into who you are? Who influenced your life? What experiences changed you? How did your childhood mold you into the person you are today? What might be needed to change you again? Looking carefully into our hearts will help us to know better who we are.

We need to poke around in our hearts and discover how we measure up to God's dreams for us as revealed in scripture. Some of the values we ought to hold are universal and were often taught by Jesus himself. Do we understand God as the Lord of all life? Do we believe God calls us to a special way of life? What is our relationship with our neighbor? How do we treat one another? How do we take care of ourselves? What did Jesus teach us about getting along together? How are we to conduct our business? What

does it mean for us to repent and change our ways? Are we the person God created us to be?

Above all, opening and exploring our hearts should involve listening. We ought to take some time to listen for God. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that we do plenty of speaking to God and asking God to listen to us, but rarely do we take time to listen for God.³ Lent affords us the opportunity to hear God speak through scripture, song, sermons, poems, and prayers. We can listen for God in nature and in the deepest recesses of our hearts. Learning silence is good because we just might provide God with an opportunity to whisper our way.

When we open and explore our hearts, becoming vulnerable and trusting of God, when we look and listen, we will discover that our heart has become a safe place again, a sanctuary where we can meet God, completely vulnerable, but without fear. And we will discover that within our hearts we can truly worship God as we become who God wants us to be. Heart work is hard work, but the most rewarding work of all for we meet the person we are and find the person God wants us to become.

A hymn penned in the year 1900 by Rev. Elisha Hoffman says it well:

You have longed for sweet peace, and for faith to increase,
And have earnestly, fervently prayed;
But you cannot have rest, or be perfectly blest,
Until all on the altar is laid.⁴

That altar is in our heart, the sanctuary where we truly meet and worship God with our lives. Perhaps in that holy space we will discover the truth of the spiritual, “Ev’ry time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart I will pray.” May this be the time for us all. Amen.

³Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent*, (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), 50.

⁴Elisha Hoffman, “Is Your All on the Altar,” text and music, 1900.

February 18, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy and Gracious God, who brought light out of darkness, creation out of confusion, and life out of death, we praise you because you are the Source of all that we have and all that we are. In the midst of all that calls for our attention, you alone call us by name. In the midst of a world filled with confusion and chaos, you offer guidance. In a world plagued with violence and despair, you offer peace and hope. In the midst of everything and everyone who demand that we earn our worth and pull our weight, you offer grace and acceptance and rest from our labors. We come this day expressing our thanks and praise for every gift which comes from your generous hand.

And we also come now, O God, to pray for others throughout our community and beyond who are in need of restoration and hope. May we be present with those who are sad or lonely, reminding them that you do not despise a broken heart but welcome its tears. May we offer consolation to those who live in fear, giving witness to the good news of your grace for the most vulnerable among us. May we attend generously and compassionately to the needs of those whose bodies and minds ache for healing and peace, sharing your powerful word of redemption and wholeness. May we speak and act with courage and conviction in the face of the evils of this world, always standing on the side of those who have suffered because of exploitation or injustice. And may we profess to all who long to hear good news our trust in your mercy that will ease our pain, in your compassion that will inspire us to care for one another, and in your power that supports us in our crushing sorrows and dances with us in our joyful triumphs.

In this season of Lent, guide us to open our hearts to your Spirit and to prepare there a worthy place for you to dwell. In our brokenness we turn to you, praying that you will resurrect the shattered and lifeless pieces of our lives. Take the fragments of our faith, and in your mercy, O Lord, redeem them and make us whole. In the name of the One on whose steady love we depend and whose mercies never fail, even Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

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